

The Company

THE Board of Directors sits at the head of a long, oak table, shone by shirtsleeves and suit jackets and the oil from people's hands. He must be fifty, maybe fifty-four; it's hard to tell in that elderly toupee which never matched his hair in all the time I've been employed. At my first meeting, his hair had been a gingery brown, the toupee a chestnut mahogany. Today his hair, very fine and a little thin about his ears, shows gray strands, but the toupee remains thick and rich and coarse.

In front of me sits my report: six printed pages on top of half a ream of blank paper. I am nervous I will be called to read. So I cross and uncross my right leg and fiddle with the slubs in my shantung silk skirt.

"Who wants to read their report first?" the Board calls out in a plummy voice, all rounded vowels and private schools. He stares at each of us in turn. I duck my head.

The woman next to me in a bright summer dress stands. "...I'd like to have a try," she stammers.

"Good! Good!" the Board is all approval. He smiles at her and knits his eyebrows into earnest attention.

She shuffles her papers which she's brought to the meeting untidy in a loose-leaf notebook, the kind students use in class: five or six sheets covered in Chinese characters on yellow vellum.

"Um, if it's ok, I'd like to read my report in Chinese, and then translate it into English," she says. Her pages tremble but the Board smiles.

"Go on," he says in a deep, avuncular voice.

She speaks Chinese, in slow, deliberate vowels. When she's spoken three or four sentences, she stops and says: "We at Pearson's Productions congratulate our employees this month. I have observed how people are courteous in the lunchroom. Everyone puts their plates on the conveyor belt and their cups in the sink. We are at full productivity."

"Wonderful!" the Board claps his hands. He's delighted to hear Chinese. He's delighted at full productivity. "Who's next?"

I listen to reports and stare out the window. I've been here eight months and I still don't know why. When the Board hired me, he told me I'd be the PR department. He hadn't got a PR department but he wanted one and would pay me \$120,000 per year. Previous to this, I generated marketing reports for the Yellow Pages.

On the street, a black limousine pulls up to the curb. The Board stands and presses his nose against the glass. "She's here! I'm afraid we'll have to close our meeting."

As the Board leaves the room, the rest of us crowd over to a wall of windows crowned by a gold and red brocade pelmet and dressed with heavy red velveteen curtains trimmed with gold braid. The windows we look through belong to the early 1900s: small panes of wavy glass, sealed in with putty. Small, square walnut frames.

"Do you think she's here to trim staff?" asked the young man standing next to me.

"I don't know," I responded. "What do you do?"

"Production Manager," he said. "I'm learning how to link yoga techniques to heal people's diseases. It's fascinating."

"Aren't we a bowl factory?" I asked.

"Pearson's Productions!" he said, and turned back to the window to watch the woman ascend from her car. Legs in brown hose, with pointy-toed blue leather shoes, a

short, blue skirt and a matching peplum jacket. Her hat, with its rounded crown and wide brim suited a polo match.

The Board took her small hand and kissed it. Then he folded her arm into the crook of his own and they walked through the factory door.

My office isn't big, although I don't need anything fancy. It's a piece-of-pie shaped room with a small window with white-painted panes overlooking the back lot. When I arrived here, snow humped over the picnic benches, and ice encrusted the pond so thickly the plant department scraped it clean. The factory kept skates in the lockers by the door outside, and I watched people skating over their lunch hours and after work while I fiddled with my computer and tried to write reports.

I have a computer, a printer, a telephone, an in-box and out-box and internal mailbox. We do not have company email, and I took this as a project when I first arrived at Pearson's Productions and the Board showed me to my office. As the PR department, I felt we should communicate. My next project would be a company website, and a company newsletter, and then raising our profile in the local community. This last thing I wasn't too sure about. But it had something to do with donations of over-sized checks to disabled people.

In my first report to the Board, I stood up and said: "I propose we have company email. We can go onto Facebook and sign everyone into an account. Then we can keep track of events going on in the company, and talk to each other on-line."

The Board loved it. He asked me about email, and applauded the concept, and yodeled 'Yahoo!'. But when I tried to get him aside after the meeting, he ducked away.

But I persisted. With a clipboard I visited office after office, writing down each person's email account and loading them into a master list. I gave people stickers if I'd spoken with them, and stopped people in the hallways if I hadn't. I felt important as I compiled my list and brought Pearson's Productions screaming into the 21st century.

I was the only person to use company email. My company skating party was the only event on the Facebook calendar.

The following Wednesday, a paper letter arrived through the internal post. "You are invited to present your ideas and findings in a report to the Pearson's Production Board on Friday at 10am in the main Boardroom."

I attended the meeting. I talked about the importance of internal email. How all the company notices could go out electronically. The Board smiled and nodded and clapped. He asked questions about email. He encouraged me to use it. He listened to the next report: a Floor Manager who talked about her quilting class.

I managed to get several URLs for PearsonsProductions, and presented it to the Board at the next meeting. I told him about the Internet, and how it could connect us to the world. How it could boost our sales and serve as an advertising tool. I showed him Google Analytics graphs and asked for the number of our advertising agency. He asked about advertising agencies, and why we would need one when Pearson Productions was so fabulously productive without it.

At our next meeting I screwed up my courage, and in front of everyone asked the Board why he'd hired me. "But your reports are wonderful!" he said, and smiled his broad grin. "You're a real part of the team!"

I got the website. I paid for the URL's out of the PR budget. To do this, I had to send a check requisition to accounts through internal mail, detail the spend, and bingo – they took care of the expense, and even emailed my receipt.

Now I bought web software, and a camera. I took pictures of the back lot in the spring thaw, as crocuses unfolded. I took pictures in the lunchroom. I knocked on office doors and took pictures of staff and asked for their titles, and what they did. Everyone was a production manager, or a floor manager, or a time manager, or an account executive. They couldn't tell me much about their Pearson's job – well, I'm in Production, and productivity is wonderful, and we're up again this month, which makes me happy because I'm going to use my bonus to fly to Nepal and help with a well-digging project that's connected to the orphanage I'm funding.

At the same time, I grew into my new salary. I moved house. I bought a Prius. I started eating organic foods. I bought lattes and joined a gym. No-one seemed to mind if I was a bit late for work, so I took a cycling class and a weight-lifting class and a kick-boxing class and arrived at Pearson's revved up and ready to go. I bought a new cell phone, a GPS for my car, a laptop and a video camera. I started a 401k and to fill my Roth IRAs. I visited the dentist, and then the orthodontist. And I still had enough money left over to save.

I loved my crazy job. I loved the people at work. One day, on the way to the lunchroom I heard scratching noises on a door. I knocked and opened it. There, in a broom cupboard, a bearded account executive kissed a brunette managing assistant. Pearson's Productions? What do you put in them bowls!

Our website's filling up with photos of smiling workers at full productivity. I've begun our company newsletter, which I print and deliver by hand, and I'm getting to know the factory layout. I'm proud of my work. Sometimes it feels like I'm the only one doing anything productive around here. Yesterday on the stairs I heard this girl talking about her past life in Africa in front of two of our Nigerian workers. The rudeness of it! That they'd buy into her delusions!

"You were a slave?" one of them asked. "How did they capture you from your tribe?"

And she went on to describe how the raiders had burned down her hut and killed her mother before dragging her off in leg irons.

Two floors of workers, and then heavy double doors lead down to the machine rooms. We hear the machines humming on most days, and the way they vibrate the floors and make a low, background roar makes me feel secure in my job. I want pictures of the machine rooms. They're the heart of our operation. The machinists carry big bunches of keys but they slip behind those doors too fast.

Today I position myself by the machine room doors, waiting. An elderly man walks quickly down the hall, slightly bent forward in an oily cloth coat. He notices me with the camera, and his face tightens into a frown.

"Hello sir. I'm Amanda from the PR department. Well, I am the PR department, really. You may have read my company newsletter? Or seen notices for our Yahoo group?"

He continues to frown.

“I’d like pictures of the machines for our newsletter. We hear them all day, and, well, I’d like to see the heart of our operation.”

He lifted an eyebrow at me. “You think so, do you?”

I was taken aback. Everyone at Pearson’s was so *nice*. People loved each other here. The place felt so peaceful. It was *Pearson’s*! Had this man no idea?

“Yes! I do. I want to see the heart of the company.”

“Hmph. Well. People change when they see the machine room. It takes responsibility. Amanda.” He said my name as if he’d had a hard time remembering it. He screwed up his nose and stared into my face.

“I’m responsible! Sometimes, with the way the other employees act, I think I’m the only one doing something around here!”

“It’s like that, is it?” he said.

I blushed. I’d overstepped. I wouldn’t get my pictures. “Well, I’m sure there are others...” But I just couldn’t think who they might be.

He took his big bunch of keys which he kept on a carbiner clipped onto a beltloop. He glanced up the hallway, and unlocked the door. “Quickly,” he said, shoving me a bit in the small of my back. I lurched forward, my camera clutched in front of my chest, and the door banged and echoed as he left us in the dark.

My eyes adjusted. I walked down a spiral of concrete stairs into a heavy smell of grease and metal and earth. On either side of me, great banks of machines stood silent and immobile behind a diamond mesh fence.

“The machines are off today?” I asked.

“No. Just these.” He flicked on a small, yellow light. “This is our main corridor. It runs under the whole building. Old Mr. Pearson – Tim’s father – “

I startled at the Board’s name. Tim. He was a Tim.

“ – made his money during World War II. At that time, of course, we made munitions.”

“An arms factory?”

“Yes.”

“But now these machines make bowls?”

“You could say that, in a sense. Among other things.”

“Can I take pictures? What’s your name?”

“Frank. And if you must.”

I snapped a photo, and the flash echoed over metal behemoths. Sentinels. Easter Island statues.

“It’s strange down here,” I said. “Almost...” spiritual, I wanted to say, but shut up.

“That it is.”

He took a long, black flashlight from his coat and switched it on. I walked behind him as the corridor narrowed, adding my own flash to his. But as our walk deepened, I lost my interest in my camera. The machine rooms *had* to be noisy! Row after row of machines. Oiled, clean.

And silent.

“Where is...where are...? These machines. They don’t make bowls, do they? Where are the machines that make the bowls?”

“You mean, where are the machines that make the noise,” he corrected.

“I guess. No! The *bowl* machines. That’s what I mean! Where are *they*?”

Frank stopped at a section in the wall and took out his keys. A small, ordinary house key fit into a round lock on a concrete block. But when the door swung back I could see the concrete as faux painting on drywall, screwed to a door. We stepped inside and he flicked a switch.

Speakers lined the walls. A tangle of black wires, mixing decks, and tape reels, a jumble of audio equipment had been shoved on floor-to-ceiling shelving. It seemed thrown-together, unstable, as if it would crash on me and squish the little old man, and we’d be here down in the deep dark with no-one to hear us scream, and no rescue.

“This place creeps me out,” I whispered.

“Your bowl factory,” he said, moving his arm in a jerky sweep.

“I...what do you mean? My *bowl factory*?”

“While the machines still functioned, we taped their sounds. Took a ton of recordings. Several hundred in fact.” He rubbed his chin. “Probably a bit over-the-top,” he mumbled. “But we didn’t want them to sound the same. We wanted *variety*. And gradually, as we shut the machines off, one by one, we brought the speakers on-line. It took us years to rewire this place, and put all those little speakers under the floors. Have you every re-wired something built in the 1800s? Nightmare. Complete nightmare.”

“But it vibrates!” I protested. “The machines vibrate! They shake the whole building!”

“Hmm,” he said. “Yes. That was a problem. We tried jack hammers – too messy and we couldn’t rip up our foundation. And then someone brought in this great vibrating

machine for tamping down earth. We have those placed at three locations. That was my suggestion,” he added. “We keep the vibration low. We don’t want the nails falling out!”

“I still don’t get it. Why are you pretending that we make something! Who pays my wages every month? You can’t make money *pretending* to run a factory, can you? Are you the mafia? I’m not working for the mafia!” I began to panic. Frank could have a gun. He could kill me for my camera. No-one would ever know.

Frank climbed a small step ladder, and adjusted the mixer levels. Then he pulled out a tape, pushed it into a reel-to-reel, fed tape and started the machine. He took tape from another machine and set it in a bin marked ‘August’. He chuckled and leaned against a table stuffed with boxes of cords. “The mafia. Why do people always think that? You Amanda. I pegged you as having more imagination.”

“Who could imagine this? Who could imagine that I work for a man who listens to fake reports day in, day out, in a place that’s supposed to be a bowl factory, but really is a munitions factory, but isn’t?”

“What kind of reports do you give, Amanda?” Fred asked, turning around. “Bear with me a moment, this fuse seems to be blown. We’re still not entirely on circuit breakers. Have a couple glitches to work out.”

“I’m the PR department,” I told Fred. “I talk about getting the company on email, and our new website. The Board... Tim – loves them,” I finished, trailing off.

“And that’s what you do for your monthly income?”

“Sure!” I got defensive. “That’s what I’m paid to do, isn’t it? I’m the only one whose reports make sense. Other people talk about their quilting classes, or running a nursery program, or.... God. One woman even talked in Chinese.”

“Was she any good?” He popped in the fuse. “There. I think that does it for now. Clyde’s up for the next shift. I’ll leave him a note.”

“I don’t know if she was any good! I don’t speak Chinese!”

“But do you *want* to speak Chinese?”

“No. I don’t!” I shouted.

“What do you want to do Amanda, now that you know the secret of Pearson’s awesome productivity?”

I followed Fred back up the corridor. I’d forgotten about my camera. I trailed my hand against the diamond mesh fence, the machine sentinels more silent, more quizzical than before.

“Tell me that the money they give me every month is honest. I don’t want to work for dishonest people Fred. I don’t want to take black money.”

He stopped and gave my shoulder a squeeze. “That’s why we can keep Pearson’s Productions open. Mr. Pearson knew that Tim had only one talent. He could always hire the heart of gold. Without fail. As a boy, following his father around the factory, he’d point out the workers with the good hearts. After a while, Mr. Pearson would find an excuse to get rid of the others. Until every person here functioned from the same place.”

Fred tapped his chest.

“No way.”

“Yes. That’s the only reason Mr. Pearson didn’t close the factory. When he died, and the company passed to Tim, he knew his son...well, Tim’s a bit simple. But Tim imitated his father in everything.”

I thought of the toupee. It had to be fifty years old. That meant The Board had been wearing a toupee since his bald skull popped out of his mama's belly. More likely, it belonged to his father.

“And his father liked to listen to reports?”

“Not so much liked to listen to them. Had to. He worked this munitions factory through the war and made a bundle. More than he could ever spend, more than Tim could spend. By the time Tim came along, he'd put some machines into household-good production and ran it like that through the sixties. Those are the years he took Tim to work. Meanwhile, he wrapped all the money into trusts, and administered the whole thing through his accounts department.”

“Which is why they're the only department you can reach by email?” I guessed.
“They had to come into this century?”

“Yep.”

“So when Mr. Pearson died, he passed the company to his son, but all The Board remembers about his father's business is listening to reports?”

“And hiring people.”

“So what am I supposed to be doing here?”

“That's up to you, Amanda. That's completely up to you. How will you write your next report?”

Is it harder to go to work every day when you don't have a role to play? Or is it harder when the role is one you hate?

I'd liked being the PR department. It gave me purpose. I had a reason to walk the halls. I had something important to say in my reports. I had excuses to tap on people's doors and walk in and socialize with them, interrupting their work. I even had reason to climb on my high horse and judge them.

When I came up from the machines, I felt stupid and small. Amanda. What do you want to do with 40 hours a week and \$120,000 a year? Who will you be? Who are you, in your soul?

In the Board's meetings, I sat silent, from August to January. He always stared at me, like a dog who wonders why you hid the piece of meat in your fist behind your back. He cocked his head at me, and pushed his eyebrows together.

In April, after visiting my pie-shaped room every day, after filling my eight hours doodling at my computer, walking the halls, listening to conversations, to the goings-on in cupboards, to the patter in the lunch line, I brought a single piece of paper to a meeting.

"I will read my report today," I said. I stood up, shaking in front of the others gathered at the long, oak table.

The Board nodded at me, his face grave.

"I am grateful for Pearson's Productions. We are awesomely productive. Our Nigerian colleagues founded an AIDs hospital during their stay with us, as well as a mediation center which they hope will spread peace in Africa. Our production managers continue to help kids in the inner cities by planting gardens in poor neighborhoods and teaching people how to raise and cook their own food. Our account executives are learning how to de-salinate water, so they can pipe clean drinking water from coastal

areas to deserts. In the middle of such amazing productivity, I have decided to compile a book of the experiences of Pearson's Production staff and the people they help, so that everyone can be inspired to be their best."

The Board grinned. "Well done Amanda! Way to be part of the team!" He laughed and asked: "Does anyone else have a report?"

Deep under my feet I felt the vibration of those long-silent machines as they cranked up for the afternoon shift, and heard their dull roar, background music for my soul.